

“The Rest is Upon Us” The Covid-Crisis as a Game Changer

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In order to make sense of the Covid-crisis, it was not only referred to historical situations such as that of the Spanish Flu, but often enough to rather recent political crises. The Financial Crisis of 2008 and following as well as the “long Summer of Migration” of 2015 have often been mentioned here. Both were understood to be a political crisis and even “crisis of the European project” (Kasperek, 2015). In both cases one could argue that political reactions were insufficient or wrong – or even the cause of the problem.

With Covid, in the words of the Italian philosopher Donatella di Cesare, the “political-administrative governance that rules in times of crisis was itself ruled by something that has proven to be ungovernable” (Di Cesare, 2020, p. 36) – the “sovereign virus”. Since this problem was a given for almost all countries around the world, there seems to be a certain comparability and the question how governments reacted is particularly interesting.

As early as April 2020 two billion people lived in countries in which parliaments were restricted, the role of courts reduced, and elections postponed (Provost, 2020). It was the time of the executive. An article for “Carnegie Endowment” has concluded early on during the crisis that those countries managed to react most effectively, which a) had experience in dealing with crises, b) that were most effective in terms of running the country, and 3) which had shown the higher levels of trust by society in their governments (Kleinfeld, 2020). This, as we learn, was not a question of the political system, for at that stage at least the countries included were e.g. China and Germany.

This “hour of the executive” has taken on different forms. Germany is one of the countries that has a “Protection Infection Law”, on which it based the measures taken against the pandemic. They include the transfer of power to the Federal government and to the governments of the “Länder” to take measures via decree. Authority was thus handed over by the Federal Parliament to the executives (Gesetz zur Verhütung und Bekämpfung von Infektionskrankheiten beim Menschen (Infektionsschutzgesetz – IfSG) 2000). There seems to be agreement on evaluating the measures taken in Germany as having been as successful as they could be, and although we can regularly read about demonstrations against the measures taken, trust in the executive has gone up from 60 to even 80 percent in the course of the crisis (Marschall, 2020, p. 16). Still, political scientist Stefan Marshall rejects a too positive idea of an “hour of the (Länder-)executive”, and instead speaks of a “stress test for German Federalism” (Marschall, 2020, p. 16). More importantly, he does not consider a simple law the proper basis for the provisions it foresees. He thus calls for a change of the Basic Law and for a bigger role of the parliament (Marschall, 2020, p. 14). As for the judiciary, the former president of the German Federal Con-

stitutional Court, Hans-Jürgen Papier, highlights how disputed all measures taken necessarily need to be. Still, he holds that since nobody knows how to evaluate the threat by Covid, one can also not say whether the measures taken have been adequate or not. And yet, he adds, given the severity of measures taken it is their continuation that needs to be substantiated, not their relaxing. All measures need to be delimited as good as possible and cannot be evoked indefinitely (Papier, 2020, p. 5f.).

This has not been the case in Hungary, where the parliament declared the state of emergency on March 30, which allowed Prime Minister Victor Orbán to rule by decree and for example imprison journalists for up to five years (Roth, 2020). The step was followed by outrage throughout Europe and sharp comments in the media. Di Cesare notes that the European Union had proven to be ineffective earlier already (a statement supported by a majority of citizens, by the way, according to opinion polls), but now has simply set other priorities and let it go (Di Cesare, 2020, p. 62) Di Cesare's position was shared by many other observers, so that the question raised by Ivan Krăstev stood out. Why, he asks, was Orbán taking that step to transfer powers to him, when he possessed such encompassing power already? Krăstev understood it to be a symbolic step, and we can add as communicative action directed towards the European Union: look, I can break the rules with no consequences (Krăstev, 2020, p. 49). This conclusion was confirmed by a measure taken on September 1, when Hungary closed the borders after the cases of new infections had risen. Borders were not closed for all, however. Visitors of the UEFA soccer super cup to be held later that month in Budapest and most importantly citizens of the Visegrád countries were exempted. Discrimination between EU citizens is prohibited according to EU legislation and was thus heavily criticized by the EU Commission (nob/qu (afp 2020).

For authoritarian leaders, the Covid-crisis posed other challenges. They build on crises and fear anyway, but on those they create themselves (be it actual or fictitious crisis), and which they can thus control. They do not like, as Krăstev unfolds, crises that need to be met by the introduction of rules and explains that this was why Brazilian President Bolsonaro or Belarussian ruler Lukashenko preferred to ignore the threat (Krăstev, 2020, p. 69), and we can add that this was US President Trump's position as well as long as he could afford it.

So by adding an element to the initial quote by Di Cesare, we can hold with Slavoj Žižek that "[t]hose in charge of the state are in panic because they know not only that they are not in control of the situation, but also that we, their subjects, know this. The impotence of their power is laid bare." (Žižek, 2020, p. 123) Downplaying a crisis like the Covid pandemic is not easy, given that it spreads everywhere and dominates not only the news, but the communication between people in general. It thus comes to no surprise that media are under threat, journalists detained, as are "opposition activists, healthcare workers, and anyone else who dares to criticize the official response to the coronavi-

rus”, as we learn from Kenneth Roth. He names Thailand, Cambodia, Venezuela, Bangladesh, Turkey and Egypt as countries in which this happened, and there are surely more (Roth, 2020).

The Pessimistic Conclusions

When Europe itself was the main hotspot and epicenter of the pandemic, di Cesare emphasizes, European countries have declared entry restrictions for foreigners. She understands the virus as outer symptom of a crisis of identity happening in climate controlled and purified places of aseptic, artificial immunity; places from where the other has been expelled, the self is safe of otherness and starts turning on itself (Di Cesare, 2020, p. 29).

One way of drawing conclusions would be to understand the “hour of the executive” as coming at the expense of the basic freedoms of citizens, further delimiting the role of parliaments and courts, thus hampering the separation of powers between the branches of the government as well as their checks and balances. If we understand that not only President Trump has applied the logic of the “survival of the fittest” to how he runs the country (Assheuer, 2020); if we highlight that keeping the economy going, or at least allowing it to restart as soon as possible, even at the expense of putting people at risk, we arrive at a pessimistic outlook. Žižek thus concludes that the “real struggle will be over what social form will replace the liberal-capitalist New World Order” and that the most probable outcome of the epidemic is that a new barbarian capitalism will prevail; many old and weak people will be sacrificed and left to die; workers will have to accept a much lower standard of living; digital control of our lives will remain a permanent feature; class distinction will increasingly become a matter of life and death (Žizek, 2020, p. 127).

The Optimistic Conclusions

Those who can afford it, who did not lose their job, for whom it was not a matter of life and death, can draw more optimistic conclusions from the Covid-crisis. They can conclude that the political sphere has much more leverage than we had imagined and certainly so much more than we were told during the “financial crisis”. Alternatives are possible, and they can be implemented. The creativity to imagine, to build and live our lives differently is available and can be enacted.

We could also see in the case of Germany that the first “nationalistic reflex”, as I want to call it, was corrected, unlike in the “long summer of migration” in 2015. At first, masks were kept for themselves; borders sealed. As an effect there were long lines of trucks at the borders and goods could not be delivered; crops could not be harvested, because of the reliance on workers from Eastern Europe. So it was slowly understood that mutual help and support was needed, and that help was returned. It was also understood that only cooperation can really help in this crisis. Hospitals opened for people who could not be treated in French hospitals, masks delivered to Italy. Finally, the

fact that the EU for the first time in its history decided to took on its own debts and that is: establish its own fiscal household, is considered a breakthrough (Habermas, 2020, p. 16).

Furthermore, the Covid-crisis led to a situation in which an otherwise rather utopian cosmopolitan idea of citizenship beyond nationality was made applicable – if only momentarily. Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krăstev has earlier, in 2017, called what he considered to be a “migration crisis” the most pressing and dangerous threat to the European Union (Krăstev, 2017). He now writes that ethnic nationalism and xenophobic populism was very different from the “stay-at-home-nationalism” that we were seeing during the Covid-pandemic, which would be territorial and inclusive at the same time. It did not matter where one came from, but where one happened to be at the moment the crisis broke out. Place of residence thus was more important than passport (Krăstev, 2020, p. 35).

While I would be cautious to join those commentators, who hold a rollback was not possible anymore after the Covid-crisis, I would want to join those who belief that changes will be fundamental. I see three main lessons:

Firstly, cultural theorists Bruno Latour has understood the Covid-crisis as “dress rehearsal” for the climate crisis (Latour, 2020). As much as such a position was criticized, as much is it one lesson indeed to prepare and to prepare in a way that alternatives are being considered and evoked.

Secondly, it is on all of us to use the moment wisely, to use the pause to get an idea of how we really want to live. How much home office was effective or not, how much work was impaired by not being able to fly, and how many of temporary solutions can actually be taken on. “The breaks are pulled, the rest is upon us”, writes di Cesare (Di Cesare, 2020, p. 27)

Thirdly, we have seen how much can be changed and changed relatively easily. We also see how much money is available. So I agree with those who now revisit claims made, for example, by climate activists, who had previously been greeted by politicians saying: we can only do so much because of the economy, the job market, the possibilities and creativity of the markets, the authority of the government. The measures declared now against the Covid-Crisis can indeed not be reversed and show how much is possible.

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